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Puerto Rico Status Ideal for Drug Trade

In the simmering debate over statehood or independence for Puerto Rico, one point is never touched on: The international dope traffickers like things just the way they are in the Connecticut-sized commonwealth.

"Its half-brother status to the United States is perfect for drug smugglers," an intelligence source told my associate Dale Van Atta. The reasons are detailed in a Drug Enforcement Administration study completed last year, "The Role of Puerto Rico in Narcotics Trafficking."

The island serves as "a funnel" for the cocaine flow from Latin America to the U.S. mainland, the report states, partly because it is "strategically located on the north-south trade route."

Another factor: while Puerto Ricans have the freedom of movement and other advantages of their American citizenship, they also "share a common language, religion, ethnic and cultural background with people in numerous Latin American countries," the report notes, adding:

"These commonalities make Puerto Rico an ideal intermediate point between drug suppliers in source countries and consumers in the U.S."

The island has become a crossroads for cocaine shipments en route to the mainland and heroin deliveries coming back to the consumer market in Puerto Rico.

"Strong family ties . . . facilitate the southward movement of heroin from the major distribution cities of Chicago and New York," the DEA study says. Unrestricted immigration from Puerto Rico to the mainland has given the 3.3 million islanders an estimated 2 million relatives in the continental United States, particularly New York City.

These family relationships account for regular, frequent and mostly legitimate travel between the mainland and Puerto Rico. The traffic is too heavy for effective police control — a situation made to order for dope smugglers.

The most convenient smuggling route by air is through San Juan International Airport, but three other airports can also be used, as well as "numerous smaller airports which cater to private aircraft, and unattended airstrips and flat areas of terrain which can accommodate light aircraft," the report states.

By sea, dope smugglers have the alluring prospect of "over 700 miles of shoreline which are available to small draft vessels," plus "numerous yacht basins, marinas, fishing villages and [some] deep water ports which service maritime traffic."

Although the DEA report emphasizes Puerto Rico's position as a transit point for Latin American dope, it also notes the following unfortunate conditions: heroin abuse on the island

"remains high"; cocaine, "primarily from Colombia, but also from Bolivia and Peru . . . is readily available and is primarily abused by the more affluent residents," and Colombian marijuana is "considered the second primary drug of choice."

The DEA report strikes a more optimistic note in its general appraisal of the island commonwealth. Although there is widespread economic hardship in Puerto Rico — more than 60 percent of the population receives food stamps, and the federal government contributes some \$3 billion a year in economic subsidies — the DEA concludes that, overall, "the abuse of dangerous drugs remains a minor problem . . ."

The use of Puerto Rico by dangerous drug smugglers, however, remains a major problem.